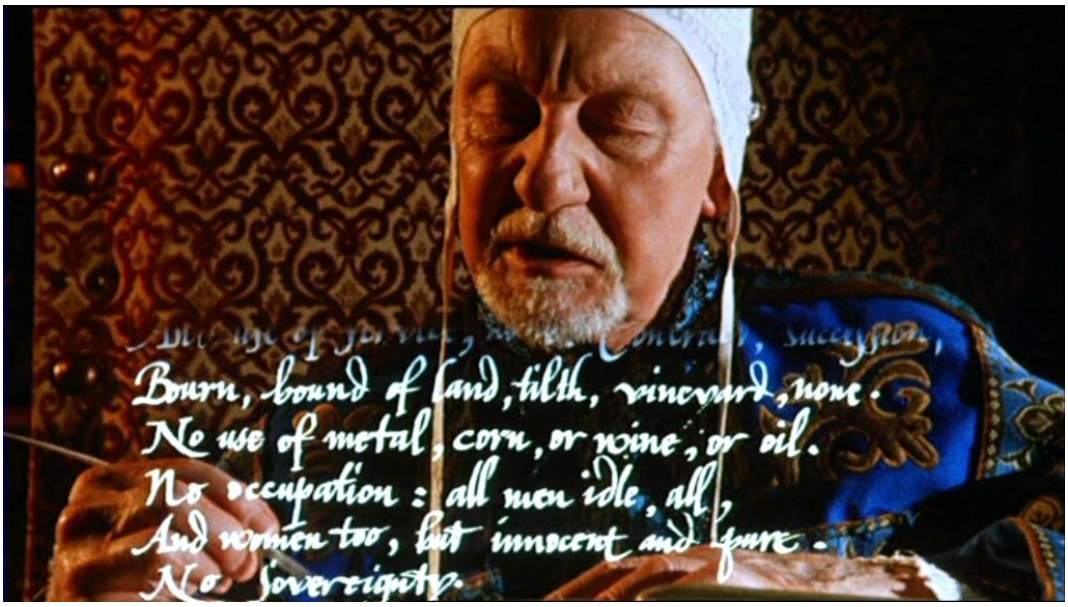
PROSPERO'S BOOKS
(Peter Greenaway, 1991)

The idea here is that Prospero imagines, creates, writes, conceives, creates, carries and gives birth to *The Tempest* as its action unfolds, voicing-over everyone's lines (aided by sonic tricks like slow-down and echo) until the umbilical severance of the fifth act, when they can become themselves, independent of him, and the actors can speak their own lines.


Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none.
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil.
No occupation: all men idle, all,
And women too, but innocent and pure.
No sovereignty.

As the play can be read as a very self-conscious statement about creativity, this ought to work. Art as substitute auto-eroticism gives way to art to substitute procreation. But there are several difficulties, nearly all self-evolved by Greenaway, which prevent the act, from coming, in his case, to fruition. The film is Joycean in that it is designed only really to be understood by one person.

Only those already intimate with the play can even begin to understand the film. My experience with at least two innocent viewers suggests that if you don't know *The Tempest*, you'll have hardly any idea of what's going on, and Shakespeare's wisdom is keeping Miranda awake throughout her father's narration in the second scene is at once clear. In the film, he talks to her while she's asleep, we assume that she dreams him and his story, and all her speeches of curiosity and protestation are cut. Seeing no narration dramatized, we hear none, and have no clear sense of how they got where they are, or who their enemies are. It's a narrative approach which excludes the narrated-to.

Both sides of the objection seem true: if you don't know *The Tempest* You'll be baffled, and if you do know it, you're in danger of being irritated out of your mind.

Sir John Gielgud, the Prospero, is wedded by tradition and temperament to a sentimental-rhetorical version of his role which ignores whole areas of guilt and despair lying about all over it. When the insubstantial pageant fades, it shouldn't be an occasion for well-fed disillusion, as it is here, because Prospero has *made it* fade, deliberately, and bewilderingly for both spectators and participants. When he abjures his rough magic, it should be in part from a sense that no human ever had the right to wield it in the first place. Either Gielgud's Prospero is too smug for a blasphemous and conscience-racked overreacher, or the actor is too smug to see him as one. The director seems to have given neither Gielgud nor any of the others much help. I'm sure, for example,, that Prospero's last line should be stressed *Let <u>your</u> indulgence set <u>me</u> free:* that is, "I've set Ariel free – please reciprocate".

As Gielgud can't do funny proletarian voices (or "dialects" as he calls them) Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban are robbed of all their humour. It isn't even clear that Greenaway himself knows they're supposed to be, funny (cp. Joseph Losey's *Don Giovanni, passim).* The dancer who plays Caliban is in any case so camp as to be unrecognisable in his role. Would such a normally-shaped, self-articulating, fully-formed fairy ever want to rape Miranda, or be so amused by the idea of peopling

the isle with his own replicants? ("No isle" would be one answer – the production design doesn't allow us one, not even of any sort, despite all the water).

Neither can Gieigud suggest paternal love or possessiveness, and he's case at least thirty years too old for such emotions: with Prospero's the only psychology an clear display, this is a truly major disability. For human interest, the mother-son relationship in *Terminator II* beats anything here, or even the son-robot relationship. They certainly needed Big Arnie as Caliban, though I shouldn't think he'd like having his organs tied quite as tightly as this chap finds acceptable.

Greenaway is sufficiently wedded to probability to under-voice Gielgud's voice with a female one, when he's saying Miranda's lines; and the Miranda herself (a) looks so ordinary as to deprive all the lines of credibility which describe her beauty, and (b) when the fifth act arrives, is, dubbed – presumably because she's French, and her English wasn't up to it (though I suspect it was because she couldn't act well enough). The French and Swedish actors who play Alonso and Gonzalo are also dubbed – as well as being placed on platform soles so high as to make them look silly, as if their twice-historical-width ruffs didn't make them look silly enough already. All these are elementary miscalculations, as were so many "touches" in the Jonathan Miller *Tempest* at the Old Vic, with Max von Sydow.

Tom Bell and Kenneth Cranham must have felt a bit strange when told that. Sir John was voicing them both over, too (each has one line left to himself).

Greenaway's well-grounded faith in our ability to absorb huge amounts of visual information each second leads him both to under-value our need to think for ourselves, or to deprive us of the opportunity of doing so, and into some pretty extraneous images to boot. We really don't need to see Miranda being raped (in "dream") by Stephano, or Claribel suffering (in "reality") from the consequences of a clitorectomy, or the blood-soaked birth of Caliban, Alien-like (in "reality") from the belly of Sycorax. Such details are in addition part and parcel of the obsession with and distaste for the flesh which other Greenaway films have shown. The spectator leaves *Prospero's Books,* which must boast more tits, bums, *montes veneres* and willies than any other serious movie in history, with a distinct sense of being nauseated by the human body. Bring back Joely Richardson's cartwheel into the swimming-pool in *Drowning by Numbers,* we cry (although we don't necessarily want the rest of *Drowning by Numbers.)* Probably it's the very visibility of so many dozens of organs and glands which is at fault in *Prospero's Books* – only modesty can preserve in us the right sense of unjaded excitement. Whatever the case may be, the masque in *The Tempest* banishes Venus, not Ceres; and you can't easily plough, sow, reap or mow, find the soil aesthetically and emotionally unappealing.

The music is all too aptly cerebral and boring. No-one will emerge from this *Tempest* singing this *Where the bee sucks* or this *Come unto these yellow sands.* As there are three Ariels, none of whom say anything, and at least one of whom looks as if he's only been told where to lie, and what to look at, during the lighting set-up, the music is in addition seriously deprived of context.

Gielgud at first wanted Bergman or Kurosawa to direct: Richard Attenborough was talking about the project some years back: but Alan Parker should have had the job. He's no sexless cerebrator, and is committed publicly to educating his children outside of the U.K. if Peter Greenaway is allowed to go on making films.

One of the twenty-four imagined "books" should have. been the *Metamorphoses.*